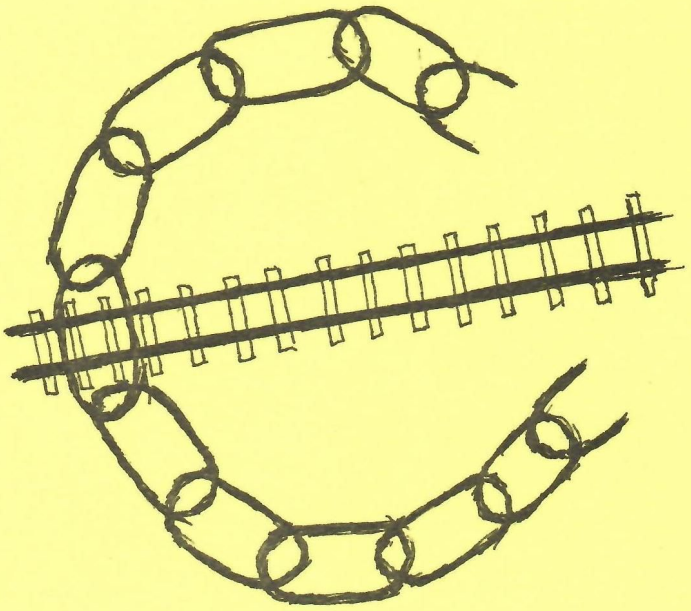
RAILROAD TO FREEDOM

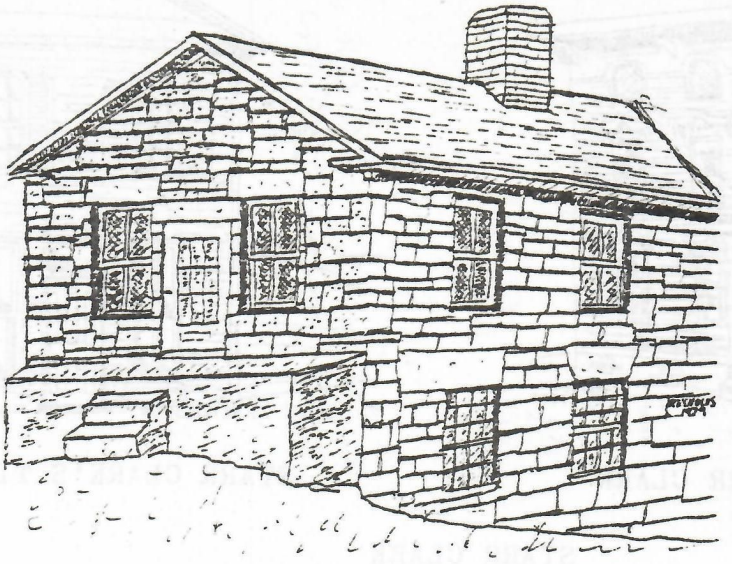
ABOLITIONISTS IN MEXICO, NEW YORK



Prepared by

MEXICO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AUGUST 1979

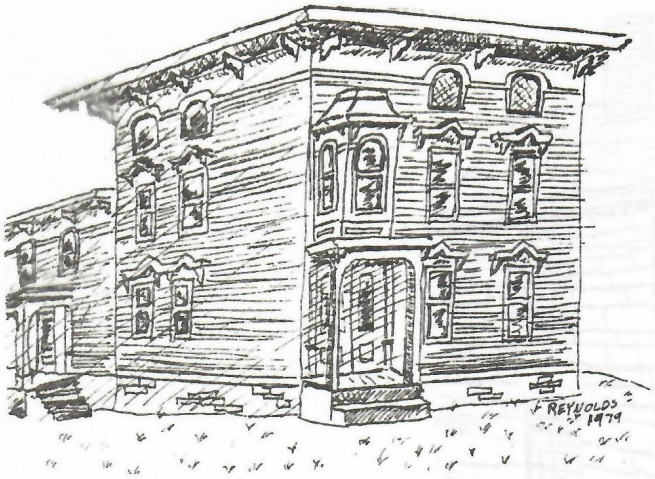


SMALL STONE HOUSE

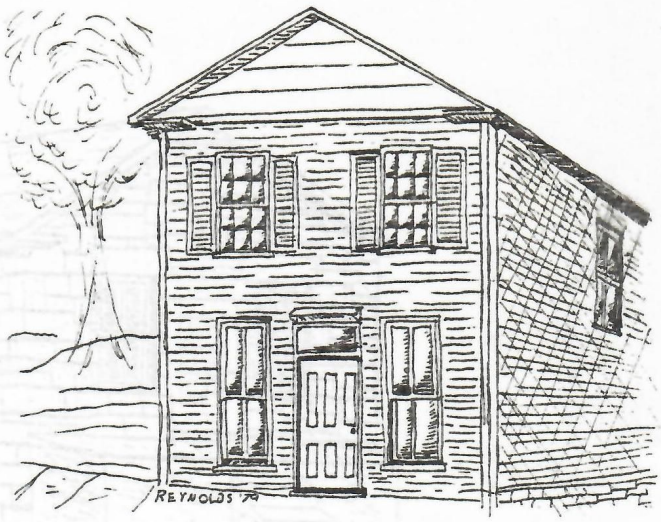
This small stone house located east of Salmon Creek (5940 East Main Street) is traditionally thought to be a station on the Underground Railroad. The house if presently owned by Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Johnson. The building was used at one time by Philip Smith as a grocery store.

Elizabeth Simpson in Mexico, Mother of Towns says, "There is a tradition of a tunnel running from the basement of this building under the road to the Eagle Tavern." This is possibly true but open to question. "Gossip about Starr Clark's tunnel would have been enough to suggest the existence of any number of tunnels and the word 'Underground' has been taken in its literal meaning by many."

If some of the tunnels are imaginary, the stations on the Underground Railroad are real and their operators deserve to be remembered.



REBUILT HOUSE OF STARR CLARK



STARR CLARK'S TIN SHOP

STARR CLARK

The house and shop of Starr Clark are located on East Main Street. Clark's house is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Fred Peterson. The shop houses the Town Tavern.

A petition, protesting slavery, was written to the House and Senate of the U.S. by citizens of Mexico in September 1835. Starr Clark was the first to step forward and sign his name.

His store and tin shop was built in 1827 and occupied by Mr. Clark from 1832-1866. In 1861 the store advertised: stoves, pipes, stove trimmings, Peckham agriculture furnaces, and tinware of all kinds at wholesale and retail.

But the store offered much more, for it was the headquarters of the Underground Railroad. Here time-tables were arranged and trains dispatched. Passengers were concealed in the store basement or in a dark tank-room over the kitchen in the Clark home. To avoid detection in case of search, a tunnel was constructed between the cellars of the house and the store. The tunnel has since been closed and the entrance stoned up.

Mr. Clark was a tireless worker in the Anti-Slavery Society in Mexico and in 1837 he was elected secretary of the county society. He acted in this capacity until January 1839.

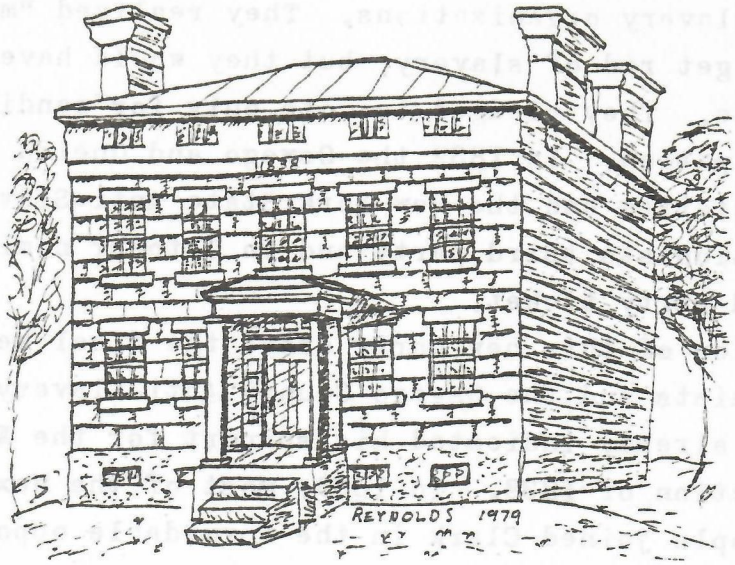
In 1838 Mexico abolitionists began to break away from county and state anti-slavery organizations. They realized "moral suasion" alone could not get rid of slavery, but they would have to use the power of the vote. They pledged to vote only for candidates who supported Emancipation. In 1839 the Oswego and Oneida County Anti-Slavery Societies and the New York State Anti-Slavery Society formed an abolutionists third party and in October nominated a separate third party ticket.

The formation of this new party drove the final wedge between Mexico abolitionists and the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society. Starr Clark had already indicated his support for the Whigs in the crucial election of 1838. In 1839, most of the Mexico Anti-Slavery people joined Clark in the formidable opposition to the third party men in the rest of the county. The hope of Starr Clark and the Mexico abolitionists was to accomplish more by working within the existing parties.

Clark worked hard for the Whigs and wheeled much influence. In Mexico in 1839 the Whig candidates for state Assembly received over 150 more votes than their Democratic counterparts. In the 1840 presidential election, only fourteen men voted the Liberty Party ticket. In the 1841 national elections, Liberty Party candidates for county offices received only four votes from Mexico township. The isolation of Mexico abolitionists from their former allies in the rest of the county had become complete and Starr Clark and the Whig party firmely established.

Of Starr Clark's civic life, we know that in 1836 he subscribed $25 for building the second Academy and in 1855 the firm gave $50 for the third one. He served as County Treasurer in 1840, Postmaster 1841-43, Supervisor 1843, Justice of the Peace 1845 and again 1847049. He served on the Board of Trustees of the Academy in 1845 and was their treasurer in 1847.

His obituary in September 1866 spoke of Mr. Clark as one of the oldest, earliest and most prominent citizens and a zealous supporter of the Whig party, whose local redezvous was his store. And as a man "who had given impartial justice to all men of all conditions and color. For a quarter of a century Negroes knew that in Mexico was at least one open hand, open purse and open home."



PETER CHANDLER HOUSE

The Peter Chandler house (at 5897 Main Street) was occupied in the 1850's by Leonard Ames, Jr. It is a beautiful Georgian limestone house built in 1838 by Peter Chandler, the "merchant prince of Mexico." The house is presently owned by Mr. and Mrs. E.F. Beadel.

Chandler was born in Connecticut in 1803 and came to Mexico in 1827 with $1,090, looking for a business location. Through good business and money management he increased his property to $76,000 by the time of his early death in 1843.

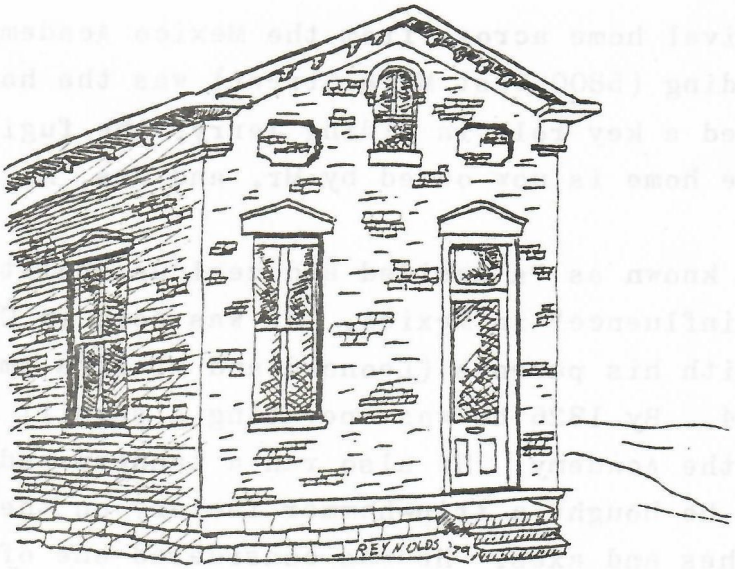
Leonard Ames, Jr., who lived in the Chandler house in the 1850's, was deeply involved in the Abolitionists Movement. He is brother to Orson Ames who guarded Jerry McHenry of the famed "Jerry Rescue" on his first night in Mexico. Ames' uncle Solomon Peck was also one of the planners of the Mexico part in the "Jerry Rescue."

Tradition has it that his house and the adjoining banking house, of which he was part owner, (presently the Production Credit building) were connected by a tunnel. No truth of it exists, but it is probable that both buildings were "depots" on the Underground Railroad.

In the 1880's Ames had plans drawn up for extensive interior alterations which were never executed and the beautiful interior still remains.

The sixth owner, Dr. Fred Stone, who lived here from 1913-21, removed a frame addition from the west stone wall to create a small house which stood in what is now Givo's parking lot.

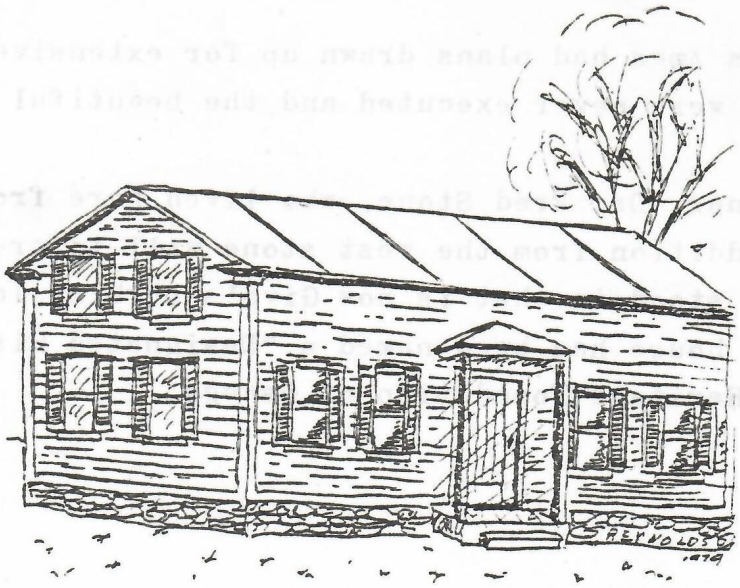
The Chandler house has been named a "Designated Historic Landmark" by the Heritage Foundation of Oswego.



AMES BANK

In 1855 Leonard Ames, Jr., in partnership with James S. Chandler in the banking business, built the brick banking house, (formerly Mexico Lunch and presently Production Credit), adjoining the Chandler property to the east.

Local legend tells of a tunnel built by Ames between the Chandler house and the Bank, and although no proof of a tunnel exists, both buildings were Underground Railroad "Depots."



ORSON AMES HOUSE

This Greek Revival home across from the Mexico Academy and Central School building (5800 West Main Street) was the home of Orson Ames and played a key role in hiding Jerry, the fugitive slave, in 1851. The home is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. B. Olin Backus.

Orson Ames was known as "a decided and zealous abolitionist" and "a man of much influence" in Mexico. He was born in Connecticut in 1799 and moved with his parents (Leonard and Minerva Ames) to Mexico about 1804. By 1826 he was operating a sawmill on Black Creek behind the Academy. He also ran a tannery and was a shoemaker. In 1833 he bought a trip-hammer factory on the Black Creek and made scythes and axes. He was considered one of the wealthiest of the Mexico abolitionists.

Orson Ames along with eight others signed all three anti-slavery petitions sent from Mexico to the U.S. Congress. Petitions were sent in 1835, 1837 and 1845. He served on the executive committee of the Oswego County Anti-Slavery Society. Mr. Ames is best remembered for guarding Jerry on his first night in Mexico.

Orson Ames suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1861 that limited his career. He died on February 16, 1867.

THE JERRY RESCUE

The details of the "Jerry Rescue", October 1851, like many historic events is shrouded in folklore.

Jerry McHenry was the son of a mulatto slave and her white master. He was thrity years old, athletic, intelligent and well read. He had escaped and travelled North by means of the Underground Railroad. In the winter of 1849-50 he arrived in Syracuse, N.Y. and found work in first a cabinet shop and later in a cooper shop.

On October 1, 1851 Jerry was arrested. He had been reported by a slave agent, named Lear, as a fugitive slave.

A crowd gathered around Jerry as he was led away. Jerry made a frantic bolt for freedom and shackled as he was still managed to run several blocks before he was recaptured. He was thrown into a wagon and taken to the police office in the Sylvester House now known as the Jerry Rescue building.

The Liberty Party, an anti-slavery group, was having its convention this day in Syracuse. The party decided to rescue Jerry as a show of strength. They stormed the Sylvester House with a battering ram, clubs, axes and iron rods. Doors and windows were smashed and bricks torn from the walls until they rescued the shackled slave. Jerry was carried to a waiting buggy and driven, by a roundabout route, to the house of Caleb Davis on Almond Street.

The abolitionists knew all the roads north were being watched so no attempt to move Jerry was made until Sunday, October 5. He was then taken in a wagon up the Brewerton road. The tollgate keeper had agreed in advance to delay the pursurers. He answered the pursurers call slowly and then delayed them further by fumbling as much as possible. The pursuers continued until the Brewerton bridge where they gave up.

In a letter to the Mexico Independent in October 1899 Mr. Edmund Wheeler, son-in-law of Deacon Asa Beebe, gave an account of Jerry in Mexico.

Jerry was left at the home of Orson Ames, who lived opposite the Academy, for a day or two (house is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. B. Olin Backus). Mr. Ames was afread that he could not safely hid Jerry at his place and took him to Deacon Asa Beebe's who lived near where the Earl butter dish factory stood (near where Mrs. Grace Kidd lives on Academy Street). They hid Jerry in the barn for two weeks. Winsor Beebe carried food to Jerry daily when he came to care for his team. The food was carried in a bushel basket, supposedly horse feed.

Orson Ames meanwhile corresponded with his brother in Oswego who made arrangements with the captain of a lake boat to carry the "goods" to Canada. When the arrangements were completed Jerry was hidden among the bags of a wagon load of wheat and driven to Oswego by Winsor Beebe. On arriving in Oswego, Jerry was quickly put on board the waiting boat.

Jerry reached Canada safely. He found work and married. He died of consumption (TB) on October 8, 1853.

The Mexico plans for Jerry were no doubt made at Starr Clark's store. Clark was probably joined by Orson Ames, Asa Beebe and Solomon Peck.

Jerry was the most famous of the slaves forwarded to freedom by the Mexico abolitionists. Dates and details of others were not recorded for fear of punishment for aiding escaped slaves. Those who knew about the Underground Railroad told no one and when they died took the truth with them.

ASA S. WING MONUMENT

The Asa S. Wing Monument was erected in the Mexico Cemetery, September 11, 1855, to honor one of our local orators and Abolitionists. Though Asa S. Wing was actively involved locally and in Syracuse with many phases of the anti-slavery movement, his main contribution was as an orator traveling through this state and New England. Elizabeth Simpson in Mexico, Mother of Towns, reports that as his health was failing and "he could speak only in a whisper, such was his eloquence and power that audiences would eagerly strain their ears to hear his pleas for the emancipation of the Negro Slave."

It is perhaps best to understand his work and the occasion when the monument was dedicated by using excerpts from a paper which was presented to the Boston Reunion of the Wing Family of America in 1907 by a gentleman who had attended the celebration in 1855. Included in his paper is the text of the Fredrich Douglas speech which was delivered on that day.

> "I well remember the event...the large assemblage had gathered...so many...that their vehicles almost barricaded the village streets. All classes of people were there, rich and poor, black and white,...poets, statesmen, great orators...to honor the memory of Asa S. Wing, the Abolitionists, the keen lawyer who left his practice and devoted his life to freeing the slave, and who died in early manhood, a martyr to the cause."

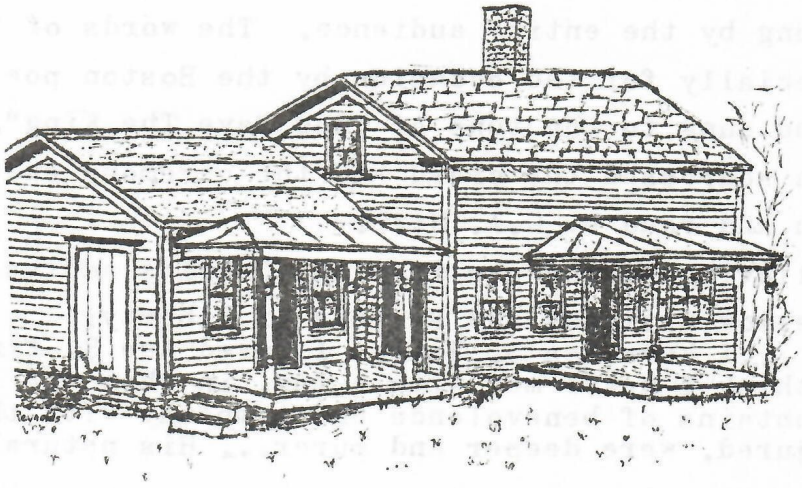
The paper goes on to note that the program included a hymn which was sung by the entire audience. The words of the hymn were written especially for the occasion by the Boston poet, John Pierpont, and sung to the tune of "God Save The King". Fredrick Douglas then addressed the crowd and the ceremony ended with a poem written and read by C.A. Hill.

The following quotes are from the Douglas address:

> "Fellow Citizens and Friends of Liberty:
> ...I knew Asa S. Wing. I loved Asa S. Wing I think I never met with a man, in whom the fountains of benevolence and sympathy with the injured, were deeper and purer... His natural

abhorrance of oppression, and of the...indifference ...on all sides to the...stupendous crime of Slavery, deeply concerned him, and swept him on to labors far too arduous for his slender frame. Night after night, and day after day, in wet or in dry,... he poured out his life for the perishing slave, pleading for him with an earnestness and an eloquence which could scarcely have been more direct, pathetic, and touching, had his own wife and children been on the block.

I stand in the midst of the friends and relatives of Asa S. Wing...Endeared to you as a friend, and nieghbor, he was chiefly endeared to me by his devotion to the cause of Liberty and Humanity...Mr. Wing was a young man; young as he was, it was his privilege to give nearly twenty years of his life to the cause...He did not shrink from the perils and hardships of the cause ...He dared to be called an Abolitionists, when... mob violence howled from one end of the State to the other."



REFERENCES

Simpson, Elizabeth, Mexico, Mother of Towns, Buffalo, N.Y.: J.W. Clement Company, 1949.

Wellman, Judith, " 'Bound by Duty:' Abolitionists in Mexico, New York, 1830-1842," Journal, Oswego County Historical Society, 1973.

Snyder, Charles, Oswego From Buckskin To Bustles, Port Washington, N.Y.: Ira J. Friedman Inc., 1968.

"Two Versions of Famous Jerry Rescue," Mexico Independent Centennial Issue, 1961.

"Grip's Historical Souvenir of Mexico, N.Y., Historical Souvenir Series NO. 15, Syracuse, N.Y. 1903.

CONTRIBUTORS

Mary Jean Munger, Chairperson
Mary Mack
Thomas Reynolds
Bonnie Shumway

Copyright © 1985 by
The Mexico Historical Society
All Rights Reserved.